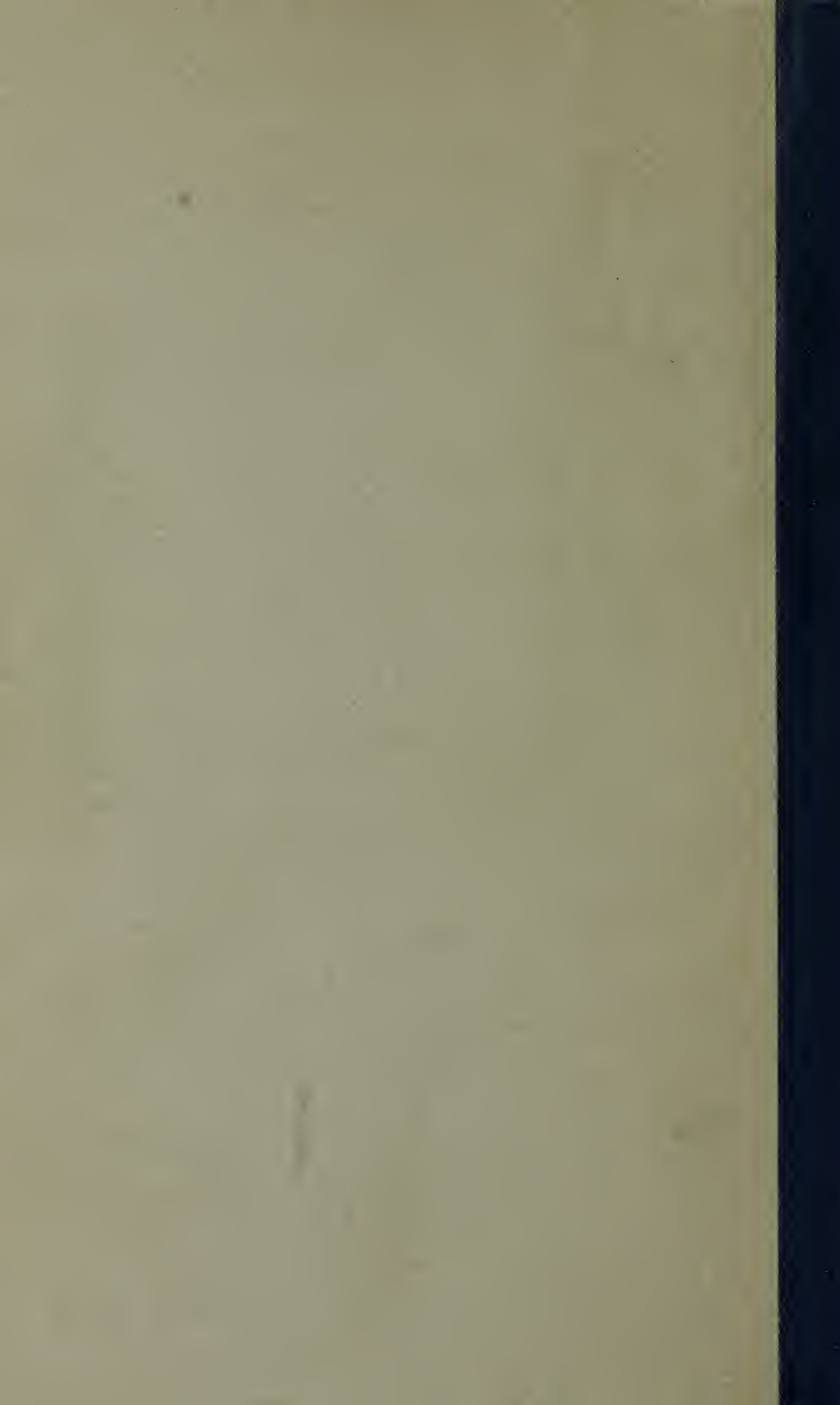



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The appetite for news.







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THE APPETITE FOR
NEWS

Excerpt from
Household Words, June 1850

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herself had intended it, warned by the strange feelings which had come over her as she walked up the street: and it would gratify Aunt's feelings that the corpse should not be left. She intended to lie down and sleep beside the still and unbreathing form of the cousin whose last hours had been so beautiful in her eyes. But Aunt's feelings were now tried in another direction. Unable to move, Aunt was sorely distressed by Jem's moanings and restlessness; and Mary was the only one who could keep him quiet in any degree. So, without interval, she went to her work of nursing again. Next, the funeral of Mrs. Billiter, and two or three more, fixed for the same day, were put off, because Mr. Finch was ill. And when Mr. Finch was ill, he sent to beg the Good Lady to come immediately and nurse him. After writing to his own family, to desire some of them to come and take charge of him, she did go to him: but not to remain day and night as she did with the poor who had none to help them. She saw that all was made comfortable about him, gave him his medicines at times, and always spoke cheerfully. But it was as she saw from the beginning. He was dying of fear, and of the intemperate methods of precaution which he had adopted, and of dissatisfaction with himself. His nervous depression from the outset was such as to predispose him to disease, and to allow him no chance under it. He was sinking when his mother and sister arrived, pale and tearful, to nurse him: and it did no good that they isolated the house, and locked the doors, and took things in by the window, after being fumigated by a sentinel outside. The doctor laughed as he asked them whether they would not be more glad to see him, if he came down the chimney, instead of their having to unlock the door for him. He wondered they had not a vinegar bath for him to go overhead in, before entering their presence. The ladies thought this shocking levity; and they did not conceal their opinion. The doctor then spoke gravely enough of the effects of fear on the human frame. With its effects on the conscience, and on the peace of the mind, he said he had nothing to do. That was the department of the physician of souls. (His hearers were unconscious of the mournful satire conveyed in these words.) His business was with the effect of fear on the nerves and brain, exhausting through them the resources of life. He declared that Mr. Finch would probably have been well at that moment, if he had gone about as freely as other persons among the sick, more interested in getting them well than afraid of being ill himself; and, for confirmation, he pointed to the Good Lady and the Warrenders, who had now for two months run all sorts of risks, and showed no sign of fever. They were fatigued, he said; too much so; as he was himself; and something

must be done to relieve Miss Pickard especially; but—

"Who is she?" inquired the ladies. "Why is she so prominent here?"

"As for who she is," replied he, "I only know that she is an angel."

"Come down out of the clouds, I suppose."

"Something very like it. She dropped into our hollow one August evening—nobody knows whence nor why. As for her taking the lead here, I imagine it is because there was nobody else to do it."

"But has she saved many lives, do you think?"

"Yes, of some that are too young to be aware what they owe her; and of some yet unborn. She could not do much for those who were down in the fever before she came: except, indeed, that it is much to give them a sense of relief and comfort of body (though short of saving life) and peace of mind, and cheerfulness of heart. But the great consequences of her presence are to come. When I see the change that is taking place in the cottages here, and in the clothes of the people, and their care of their skins, and their notions about their food, I feel disposed to believe that this is the last plague that will ever be known in Bleaburn."

"Plague! O horrid!" exclaimed the shuddering sister.

"Call it what you will," the doctor replied. "The name matters little when the thing makes itself so clear. Yes, by the way, it may matter much with such a patient as we have within there. Pray, whatever you do, don't use the word 'plague' within his hearing. You must cheer him up; only that you sadly want cheering yourselves. I think an hour a day of the Good Lady's smile would be the best prescription for you all."

"Do you think she would come? We should be so obliged to her if she would!"

"And she should have a change of dress lying ready in the passage-room," declared the young lady. "I think she is about my size. Do ask her to come."

"When I see that she is not more wanted elsewhere," replied the doctor. "I need not explain, however, that that smile of hers is not an effect without a cause. If we could find out whether we have anything of the same cause in ourselves, we might have a cheerfulness of our own, without troubling her to come and give us some."

The ladies thought this odd, and did not quite understand it, and agreed that they should not like to be merry and unfeeling in a time of affliction; so they cried a great deal when they were not in the sick room. They derived some general idea, however, from the doctor's words, that cheerfulness was good for the patient; and they kept assuring him, in tones of forced vivacity, that there was no danger, and that the doctor said he would be well very soon. The patient groaned, remembering the daily funerals of the last

few weeks, and the only consequence was that he distrusted the doctor. He sank more rapidly than any other fever patient in the place. In a newspaper paragraph, and on a monumental tablet, he was described as a martyr to his sacred office in a season of pestilence; and his family called on future generations to honour him accordingly.

"I am sorry for the poor young man," observed the host at the Plough and Harrow; "he did very well while nothing went wrong; but he had no spirit for trying times."

"Who has?" murmured farmer Neale. "Any man's heart may die within him that looks into the churchyard now."

"There's a woman's that does not," observed the host; "I saw the Good Lady crossing the churchyard this very morning, with a basket of physic bottles on her arm—"

"Ah! she goes to help to make up the medicines every day now," the hostess explained, "since the people began to suspect foul play in their physic."

"Well; she came across the bit of grass that is left, and looked over the rows of graves—not smiling exactly, but as if there was not a sad thought from top to bottom of her mind—much as she might look if she was coming away from her own wedding."

"What is that about 'sweet hopes,' in the newspaper?" asked Neale; "about some 'sweet hopes' that Mr. Finch had? Was he going to be married?"

"By that, I should think he was in love," said the host: "and that may excuse some backwardness in coming forward, you know."

"The Good Lady is to be married, when she gets home to America," the hostess declared. "Yes, 'tis true. Widow Johnson told the doctor so."

"What *will* her lover say to her risking her life, and spending her time in such a way, here?" said Neale.

"She tells her aunt that he will only wish he was here to help her. He is a clergyman. 'O!' says she, 'he will only wish he was here to help us.'"

"I am sure I wish he was," sighed Neale. "I wonder what sort of a man will be sent us next. I hope he will be something unlike poor Mr. Finch."

"I think you will have your wish," said the landlord. "No man of Mr. Finch's sort would be likely to come among us at such a time."

THE SON OF SORROW.

A FABLE FROM THE SWEDISH.

ALL lonely, excluded from Heaven,
Sat Sorrow one day on the strand;
And, mournfully buried in thought,
Form'd a figure of clay with her hand.

JOVE appeared. "What is this?" he demands;
She replied, "'Tis a figure of clay.
Show thy pow'r on the work of my hand;
Give it life, mighty Father, I pray!"

"Let him live!" said the God. "But observe! As I *lend* him, he mine must remain."

"Not so," Sorrow said, and implor'd,
"Oh! let me my offspring retain!"

"'Tis to me his creation he owes."

"Yes," said JOVE, "but 'twas I gave him breath
As he spoke, EARTH appears on the scene,
And, observing the image, thus saith:

"From me—from my bosom he's torn,
I demand, then, what's taken from me."

"This strife shall be settled," said JOVE;
"Let SATURN decide 'tween the three."

This sentence the Judge gave. "To all
He belongs, so let no one complain;
The life, JOVE, Thou gav'st him shalt Thou
With his soul, when he dies, take again.

"Thou, EARTH, shalt receive back his frame,
At peace in thy lap he'll recline;
But during his whole troubled life,
He shall surely, O SORROW, be thine!"

"His features thy look shall reflect;
Thy sigh shall be mixed with his breath;
And he ne'er shall be parted from thee
Until he reposes in death!"

MORAL.

The sentence of Heaven, then is this:
And hence Man lies under the sod;
Though SORROW possesses him, living,
He returns both to EARTH and to God.

* THE APPETITE FOR NEWS.

THE last great work of that great philosopher and friend of the modern housewife Monsieur Alexis Soyer, is remarkable for curious omission. Although the author—a foreigner—has abundantly proved his extensive knowledge of the weakness of his adopted nation; yet there is one of our peculiarities which he has not probed. Had he left out all mention of cold punch in connexion with turtle; had his receipt for curry contained no cayenne; had he forgotten to send up tongs with asparagus, or to order a service of artichokes without napkins, he would have been thought forgetful; but when—with the unction of a gastronome, and the thoughtful skill of an artist—he marshals forth all the luxuries of the British breakfast-table, and forgets to mention its first necessity he shows a sort of ignorance. We put it to his already extensive knowledge of English character, whether he thinks it possible for any English subject whose means bring him under the screw of the Income-tax, to break his fast without—a newspaper.

The city clerk emerging through folding doors from bed to sitting-room, though thirsting for tea, and hungering for toast, darts upon that morning's journal with an eagerness, and unfolds it with a satisfaction, which show that all his wants are gratified at once. Exactly at the same hour, his master, the M.P., crosses the hall of his mansion. As he enters the breakfast-parlour, he fixes his eye on the fender, where he knows his favourite damp sheet

will be hung up to dry.—When the noble lord first rings his bell, does not his valet know that, however tardy the squire-maid may be with the early coffee, he cannot appear before his lordship without the *Morning Post*? Would the minister of state presume to commence the day in town till he has opened the *'Times'*, or in the country till he has perused the *'Globe'*? Could the oppressed farmer handle the massive spoon or his first sip out of his sèvres cup till he has read of ruin in the *'Herald'* or *'Standard'*? Might the juvenile Conservative open his lips or imbibe old English fare or to utter Young England opinions, till he has glanced over the *'Chronicle'*? Can the financial reformer now breakfast-table happiness till he has digested the *'Daily News'*, or skimmed the *'Express'*? And how would it be possible or mine host to commence the day without eeping his customers waiting till he has perused the *'Advertiser'* or the *'Sun'*?

In like manner the provinces cannot—once week at least—satisfy their digestive organs till their local organ has satisfied their minds.

Else, what became of the 67,476,768 newspaper stamps which were issued in 1848 (the latest year of which a return has been made) to the 150 London and the 238 provincial English journals; of the 7,497,064 stamps pressed on the corners of the 97 Scottish, and of the 7,028,956 which adorned the 117 Irish newspapers? A professor of the new science of literary mensuration has applied his foot-rule to this mass of print, and publishes the result in *'Bentley's Miscellany.'* According to him, the press sent forth, in daily papers alone, a printed surface amounting in twelve months to 349,308,000 superficial feet. If to these are added all the papers printed weekly and fortnightly in London and the provinces, the whole amounts to 1,446,150,000 square feet of printed surface, which was, in 1849, placed before the comprehensive vision of John Bull. The area of a single morning paper,—the *Times*—is more than nineteen and a half square feet, or nearly five feet by four, compared with an ordinary octavo volume, the quantity of matter daily issued is equal to three hundred pages. There are four morning papers whose superficies are nearly as great, without supplements, which they seldom publish. A fifth is only half the size. We may reckon, therefore, that the constant craving of Londoners for news is supplied every morning with as much as would fill about twelve hundred pages of an ordinary novel; or not less than five volumes.

These acres of print sown broad-cast, produce a daily crop to suit every appetite and every taste. It has winged its way to every spot on the earth's surface, and has last settled down and arranged itself into intelligible meaning, made instinct with ink, to tell of a next-door neighbour; then dwells in the uttermost corners of the

earth. The black side of this black and white daily history, consists of battle, murder, and sudden death; of pestilence and tempest; of plague, famine, and ruin; of sedition, privy conspiracy and rebellion; of false doctrine, heresy, and schism; of all other crimes, casualties, and falsities, which we are enjoined to pray to be defended from. The white side chronicles heroism, charitableness, high purpose, and lofty deeds; it advocates the truest doctrines, and the practice of the most exalted virtue: it records the spread of commerce, religion, and science; it expresses the wisdom of the few sages and shows the ignorance of the neglected many—in fine, good and evil as broadly defined or as inextricably mixed in the newspapers as they are over the great globe itself.

With this variety of temptation for all tastes, it is no wonder that those who have the power have also the will to read newspapers. The former are not very many in this country where, among the great bulk of the population, reading still remains an accomplishment. It was so in Addison's time. 'There is no humour of my countrymen,' says the *Spectator*, 'which I am more inclined to wonder at, than their great thirst for news.' This was written at the time of imposition of the tax on newspapers, when the indulgence in the appetite received a check from increased costliness. From that date (1712) the statistical history of the public appetite for news is written in the Stamp Office. For half a century from the days of the *Spectator*, the number of British and Irish newspapers was few. In 1782 there were only seventy-nine, but in the succeeding eight years they increased rapidly. There was 'great news' stirring in the world in that interval,—the American War, the French Revolution; beside which, the practice had sprung up of giving domestic occurrences in fuller detail than heretofore, and journals became more interesting from that cause. In 1790 they had nearly doubled in number, having reached one hundred and forty-six. This augmentation took place partly in consequence of the establishment of weekly papers—which originated in that year—and of which thirty-two had been commenced before the end of it. In 1809, twenty-nine and a half millions of stamps were issued to newspapers in Great Britain. The circulation of journals naturally depends upon the materials existing to fill them. While wars and rumours of wars were rife they were extensively read, but with the peace their sale fell off. Hence we find, that in 1821 no more than twenty-four millions of newspapers were disposed of. Since then the spread of education—slow as it has been—has increased the productiveness of journalism. During the succeeding eight-and-twenty years, the increase may be judged of by reference to the figures we have already jotted down; the sum of which is, that during the year 1848 there were issued, for English, Irish and Scotch newspapers

eighty-two millions of stamps,—more than thrice as many as were paid for in 1821. The cause of this increase was chiefly the reduction of the duty from an average of three-pence to one penny per stamp.

A curious comparison of the quantity of news devoured by an Englishman and a Frenchman, was made in 1819, in the *Edinburgh Review*:—‘thirty-four thousand papers,’ says the writer, are ‘dispatched daily from Paris to the departments, among a population of about twenty-six millions, making one journal among 776 persons. By this, the number of newspaper readers in England would be to those in France as twenty to one. But the number and circulation of country papers in England are so much greater than in France, that they raise the proportion of English readers to about twenty-five to one, and our papers contain about three times as much letter-press as a French paper. The result of all this is that an Englishman reads about seventy-five times as much of the newspapers of his country in a given time, as a Frenchman does of his. But in the towns of England, most of the papers are distributed by means of porters, not by post; on the other hand, on account of the number of coffee-houses, public gardens, and other modes of communication, less usual in England, it is possible that each French paper may be read, or listened to, by a greater number of persons, and thus the English mode of distribution may be compensated. To be quite within bounds, however, the final result is, that every Englishman reads daily fifty-times as much as the Frenchman does, of the newspapers of his country.’

From this it might be inferred that the craving for news is peculiarly English. But the above comparison is chiefly affected by the restrictions put upon the French press, which, in 1819, were very great. In this country, the only restrictions were of a fiscal character; for opinion and news there was, as now, perfect liberty. It is proved, at the present day, that Frenchmen love news as much as the English; for now that all restriction is nominally taken off, there are as many newspapers circulated in France in proportion to its population, as there are in England.

The appetite for news is, in truth, universal; but is naturally disappointed, rather than bounded, by the ability to read. Hence it is that the circulation of newspapers is proportioned in various countries to the spread of letters; and if their sale is proportionately less in this empire, than it is among better taught populations, it is because there exist among us fewer persons who are able to read them; either at all, or so imperfectly, that attempts to spell them give the tyro more pain than pleasure. In America, where a system of national education has made a nation of readers, (whose taste is perhaps susceptible of vast improvement, but who are readers still) the sale of newspapers greatly exceeds

that of Great Britain. All over the continent there are also more newspaper readers, in proportion to the number of people, though, perhaps, fewer buyers, from the facilities afforded by coffee-houses and reading-rooms, which are frequent. In support of this fact, we need go no farther than the three kingdoms. Scotland—where national education has largely given the ability to read—a population of three millions demands yearly from the Stamp Office seven and a half millions of stamps while in Ireland, where national education has had no time for development, eight millions of people take half a million of stamps less than Scotland.

Although it cannot be said that the appetite for mere news is one of an elevated character yet as we have before hinted, the dissemination of news takes place side by side with some of the most sound, practical, and ennobling sentiments and precepts that issue from any other channels of the press. As an engine of public liberty, the newspaper press is more effectual than the Magna Charta, because its powers are wielded with more ease, and exercised with more promptitude and adaptiveness to each particular case.

Mr. F. K. Hunt in his ‘Fourth Estate’ remarks, ‘The moral of the history of the press seems to be, that when any large proportion of a people have been taught to read, and when upon this possession of the tools of knowledge, there has grown up a habit of perusing public prints, the state is virtually powerless if it attempts to check the press. James the Second in old times, and Charles the Tenth, and Louis Philippe, more recently, tried to trample down the Newspapers, and everybody knows how the attempt resulted. The prevalence or scarcity of Newspapers in a country affords a sort of index to its social state. Where Journals are numerous the people have power, intelligence, and wealth; where Journals are few, the man is in reality mere slave. In the United States every village has its Newspaper, and every city a dozen of these organs of popular sentiment. In England we know how numerous and how influential for good the Papers are; whilst in France they have perhaps still greater power. Turn to Russia where Newspapers are comparatively unknown, and we see the people sold with the earth they are compelled to till. Austria, Italy, Spain, occupy positions between the extremes—the rule holding good in all, that in proportion to the freedom of the press is the freedom and prosperity of the people.’

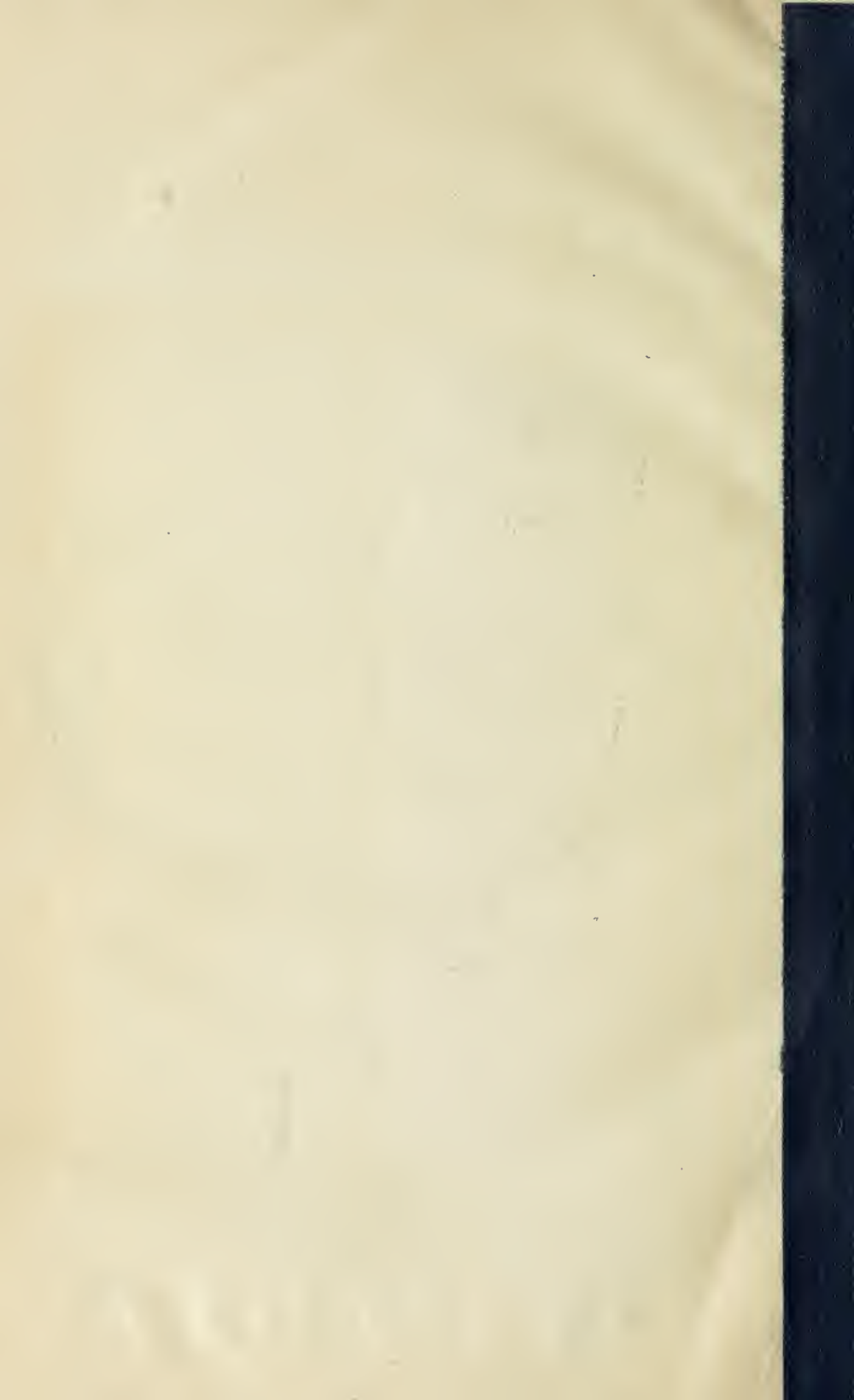
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